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Six Ways Ecumenical Progress Is Possible

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

Ecumenism got started a hundred years ago with the intuition that the state of the church—especially its mutually condemning denominations and competition in the mission field—was contrary to Jesus’s prayer for the unity of his disciples. Convicted Christians have acted on that intuition in countless ways, from joint diaconal work and government lobbying, to shared suffering at the hands of oppressors, to mergers and various fellowship agreements, to local, national, and international dialogue and scholarly research. During the first fifty years or so, the principal players were main-line Protestants and the Orthodox; in the 1960s, the previously uninterested Catholic Church joined in; and the past decade has seen the gradual entry of hitherto suspicious Evangelicals and Pentecostals.

As with any movement of its size and scope, the past century’s ecumenism has been a mixed bag. Some of the time it has led to extraordinary breakthroughs in what seemed to be intractable situations. Other times it has led to doctrinal compromise, abandonment of mission, and bureaucratic proliferation. There are no clear rules as to what will work and what won’t—ecumenism did not arrive on the scene furnished with an instruction manual. Passionately desiring to see the hostilely divided church become one according to Jesus’s prayer does not entail accepting every proposal put forth in the name of ecumenism. But it does require careful evaluation of each case on its own merits, learning from failures and successes alike. At the hundredth anniversary of the ecumenical movement, it’s fitting to take a fresh look and see what ecumenism can accomplish, and what it actually has accomplished.

What follows are six cases of ecumenical progress over the past hundred years. None of them includes organizational merger (which, curiously, remains the common perception of what ecumenism is ultimately all about). Instead, these are cases in which “stuck” positions got “unstuck,” in a variety of ways. I have identified these six ways (there are undoubtedly more) as: removing misunderstandings; distinguishing between competing internal traditions; self-correction; expansion; reminder; and repentance and forgiveness.

In reviewing these cases, it should become clear that the Lord’s call to unity is not advanced through doctrinal sellout, cheap political solutions, stubborn attachment to inaccurate polemic, or avoidance of the Christian other. It should also become clear that the church itself is a work in progress during the time between Pentecost and the

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second coming of Christ. Churches and their theologies are not as absolute and static as integers on a number line; rather, they continually develop, reconsider, and self-correct, in no small part due to exposure to each other. Even churches that have historically regarded one another as bitter enemies could not help but be affected by each other.¹ The common experience of social movements and contemporary events constantly forces churches to rethink and express afresh the faith they have received, opening up new possibilities between them. And as scholarship sifts and evaluates the past, new perspectives come to light that have previously remained obscure. In this matrix, faithful ecumenism becomes possible.

1. Removing Misunderstandings

Divided churches are deeply invested in the idea that they have understood each other perfectly and thus that their mutual rejection is perfectly justified. And if that were the case, there would be no room for any ecumenical reconciliation at all. But the urgency of Christ's prayer for his disciples to be one demands a review of past disputes to consider, first of all, whether in fact a misunderstanding gave rise to the division. If so, clearing up the misunderstanding is mandatory.

An excellent test case for this aspect of ecumenical progress is the teaching on the "assurance of salvation" that was disputed by Luther and his Roman opponents. In 1518, Luther had an audience with Cardinal Cajetan, who had been ordered by Pope Leo X to meet with the troublesome friar and get him to recant. But, the pope warned the cardinal, the latter was not to be roped into an argument with Luther. This deeply offended Luther, who wanted to be persuaded of the error of his ways by scriptural appeal (if such a thing were possible), but Cajetan "never produced a syllable from the Holy Scriptures against me."²

All the same, Cajetan did come prepared to defeat the incipient reformer's theological errors. He had read all of Luther's works that he could find and prepared a set of "opuscules" in the form of scholastic questions-and-answers based on his reading. (Luther didn't know about this and had never read anything of Cajetan's at all, putting him at a communicative disadvantage.) Question 10 in Cajetan's set asks whether "faith is necessary for an efficacious sacramental absolution."³ Must the penitent "believe with the greatest certitude that he has been absolved by God?" It seems, says Cajetan in the classic scholastic setup, that the answer is yes. In the first place, one should have faith in the word of Christ regarding what is bound and loosed on earth (Mt 16:19). Further, even if the penitent was not really contrite or the priest didn't absolve "seriously" but just as a sort of joke, the force of Christ's word would still effect a true absolution (Luther himself had said as much in a sermon on penitence). Even if one could be fully contrite, one could never know with certainty that one is fully contrite, so certainty must not lie there but in Christ. And so forth, repeating Luther's arguments.⁴

On the contrary, Cajetan concludes, this argument is “against the common meaning of the church.⁵ The problem that Cajetan identifies is Luther’s failure to distinguish between “infused faith” (*fide infusa*) and “acquired faith” (*fide acquisita*). The former, a divinely infused theological virtue, is what allows us to believe that God grants grace in the sacraments as a general rule. But it does not allow us to believe in the successful granting of that grace in any particular case, which is the realm of acquired faith. For instance, we can believe with certainty that baptism in general removes original sin, but we can’t believe with certainty that (in Cajetan’s example) an adult Jew requesting and receiving baptism has actually received the grace of baptism, since he may have put up some impediment to grace within himself (Cajetan’s example is an intention to commit adultery). In the immediate case of certainty in absolution, no penitent can be certain that he hasn’t erected an internal impediment to the reception of absolution, even if he is correctly certain that absolution can in general remove the guilt of all sins.⁶ The problem is certainty about one’s own inner states. Acquired faith “cannot be infallibly certain of its objects (to know that, by the absolution, I have been effectively absolved before God), because every man remains subject to doubt in this life: according to the common law, he does not know if he is in the grace of God.”⁷ A little later Cajetan invokes Luther’s (easy-to-misunderstand) phrase “*so glaubst du, so hast du,*” objecting that “this faith is a human work (since it is acquired)”—being about the specific human case of me, not absolution in general—and thus “the consequence of it is that confidence in one’s proper penitence consists in one’s own work of faith: this is foreign to the Christian faith.”⁸ His concluding judgment about Luther’s innovations on this matter turned out to be prophetic: “This is to build a new church.”⁹

This is the set of assumptions with which Cajetan greeted Luther and of which errors the cardinal asked him to recant. Luther asked for some time to consider the matter and lay it out in writing. On the third day of his meeting with Cajetan, Luther presented his prepared text. There, Luther reports, he plainly stated that “no one can be justified except by faith,”¹⁰ calling attention to several biblical texts as evidence. Then he clarifies that faith “is nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals.”¹¹ Thus, “a person going to the sacrament must believe that he will receive grace,”¹² since God promises to grant grace in the sacrament. On the same basis it is necessary to believe the words of absolution, since they are tied to the promise of Christ that whatever is loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven (again Matthew 16:19). Otherwise “with your doubt you make of Christ a liar, which is a horrible sin.”¹³ He recalls one biblical episode after another to show how God always asks for specific faith in specific promises to specific people, not a general faith that does not attach to any particular event. For Luther, faith and its justifying effect always happens in real time, in the church, through the declaration of the promise to a particular sinner and the reception of that promise by the sinner in faith.

But note that Luther’s appeal to confidence in the reception of grace in no way reflects the state of the sinner. It’s all about the promise of God, of recognizing that God is God and as such keeps his promises. After establishing this, Luther briefly considers the human feeling of being “unworthy and unfit.” This feeling is irrelevant

to the question, from Luther's perspective. "Through no attitude on your part will you become worthy, through no works will you be prepared for the sacrament, but through faith alone... Without faith all other things are acts of presumption and desperation."¹⁴

This concluding insight is important. If people based their certainty of receiving grace on their own worthiness, they would be either presumptuous (of course I'm good enough to receive grace!) or despairing (there's no way I'm worthy enough to receive it!). Cajetan's own concerns are echoed here. He could only imagine that certainty of the reception of grace would be a self-produced work, proudly held over against God; as a good Thomist, he knew this was utterly offensive to Christian doctrine. But his pastoral concern about human presumption and despair made him unable to understand Luther's overriding emphasis on the certainty of God's promise of grace. Likewise Luther could only hear in Cajetan's concern a binding of tortured consciences, forced into ongoing obsession with their own internal spiritual states rather than resting securely in the promise and thus truly trusting in God to be God. Cajetan and Luther's mutual concerns remained opaque to one another. The ensuing political threats of the Roman party and Luther's escalating polemic guaranteed that no fair hearing would ever take place.

Many years later, the Council of Trent maintained Cajetan's position, premised on the same misunderstanding of Luther. Canon XIV condemned anyone who says that "a person is absolved from sins and is justified by the fact that he certainly believes he is absolved and justified; or that no one is truly justified except one who believes that he is justified, and that by that faith alone are forgiveness and justification effected."¹⁵ The Roman concern is the grounding of justification in the human work of certitude. Of course, it is hard to imagine anything more offensive to Luther, either: such would be the ultimate distortion of his teaching on justification by faith. But what sounds to Lutherans like a ringing confession that Spirit-given faith is the only proper and pleasing reception of God's promise in the words of absolution clearly sounds to Rome like a self-aggrandizing act of spiritual pride, if not a vicious circle to which God is at best a tangent.

A German bilateral study from the 1980s, published in English as *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?*, takes up these "fatal misunderstandings," traced back to the meeting with Cajetan in 1518, about the exact meaning of the assurance of salvation.¹⁶ Under the rubric of mutual recognition of each other's "concerns," the study finds that the Catholic position maintains the distinction between certainty with regard to oneself and certainty with regard to God: the former is to be doubted, given the ongoing Christian struggle with weakness and sin, while the latter is to be believed wholeheartedly. Luther's proposal is to assault the doubts about the former on the grounds of the certainty of the latter. A believer, however conscious of his sin, can be confident of his salvation because "[i]t is impossible to rely on God's saving Word and at the same time, in the very act of reliance, hold that Word to be unreliable." The study recognizes Cajetan's seminal misunderstanding that Luther taught certainty "founded on the believer's subjective conviction, or even on his subjective feelings," while the reformers took the Roman views as proof that they wanted to

keep “believers in a state of uncertainty.”¹⁷ The bilateral study concludes, however, that “what the Council of Trent rejects is precisely what the Reformers were also concerned to avert: security and self-conceit about one’s own condition and a complacent certainty of being in grace, self-deception about one’s own weakness, insufficient fear of losing grace, comforting ‘feelings’ as criterion, moral laxness under appeal to the assurance of salvation, and—even more—security of predestination.”¹⁸

Building on these insights, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) deals explicitly with “Assurance of Salvation.” The result is significant, since this goes to the heart of the Lutheran understanding of the gracious word of the gospel and why justification is by faith, not merely by grace. It’s all the more important since this teaching has so often been distorted in other varieties of Protestantism, turning faith into the ultimate good work and encouraging an obsession with one’s own spiritual state. The common statement of both Lutherans and Catholics states: “We confess together that the faithful can rely on the mercy and promises of God. In spite of their own weakness and the manifold threats to faith, on the strength of Christ’s death and resurrection they can build on the effective promise of God’s grace in Word and Sacrament and so be sure of this grace” (4.5.34). It goes on to say that the Reformers exhorted believers never to look to themselves, but always to Christ, for assurance. Then we hear: “Catholics can share the concern of the Reformers to ground faith in the objective reality of Christ’s promise, to look away from one’s own experience, and to trust in Christ’s forgiving word alone” (4.5.36). In fact, the Joint Declaration takes up this renewed understanding of faith not merely as assent (the usual scholastic definition) but also as trust: “With the Second Vatican Council, Catholics state: to have faith is to entrust oneself totally to God, who liberates us from the darkness of sin and death and awakens us to eternal life” (4.5.36). This is no mere intellectual assent to facts about salvation. The debt to Luther is obvious.

The outcome, then, of many decades of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue was not only to *remove one of the misunderstandings* that had dogged their relations for nearly five centuries. It was to discover the great extent to which Catholics could willingly share Lutheran concerns and convictions, even to the point of revising their own formulations, such as the definition of faith, in line with Lutheran teaching.

2. Distinguishing between Competing Internal Traditions

But, one may rightly ask, wasn’t Luther on to something when he accused the Roman party of wanting to keep “believers in a state of uncertainty”? Was he entirely off-track with his suspicions about creeping if not outright Pelagianism in the church of his day?

Luther’s accusations were not at all unfounded. The complicating factor is that sometimes he hit the mark and sometimes he didn’t. The medieval Western church was not a theologically homogenous entity, as Protestant polemics have sometimes assumed. There in fact co-existed two entirely opposed understandings of justification in medieval scholasticism, but this was not widely recognized even on the Roman side. Disentangling the two views and their implications for today is a matter of considerable ecumenical import.¹⁹

We should start where Luther started, with the late scholastic nominalist Gabriel Biel.²⁰ Biel, following William of Ockham, distinguished between God's absolute and ordered power. Under the rubric of absolute power, God had the choice and the right to save human beings in any way whatsoever, or not at all. God's mercy is shown in his deciding to save us under the rubric of his ordered power and in being faithful to the promise offered through that ordered power. What exactly is on offer through the ordered power of God? It is the promise that God will save those who do their very best (the infamous *facere quod in se est*).

Biel, of course, was a well-educated scholastic and perfectly well aware of the early Western church's condemnation of Pelagianism, so it is worth asking how he thought he could defend such an outrageously Pelagian account of salvation. The first aspect has already been noted: since God could have offered salvation in a way that was absolutely impossible for humans to manage, or could have refused to save at all, grace is already evident in the provision for an accessible salvation.²¹ Further, and more significantly, Biel assumes that the natural powers bestowed on created human beings are eminently up to the task. Unlike Luther (and, as we shall shortly see, Thomas Aquinas), Biel makes no strong distinction between the human will before and after the fall into sin. Since in Biel's view "freedom of the will" is an essential predicate of humanity, to suggest that humans have lost free will is the same as to suggest that they are no longer human. At worst, original sin makes it harder and less pleasant to love and obey God above all things, but certainly not impossible. As far as Biel is concerned, "absolute love [of God] is within the reach of natural man *without the assistance of grace*."²² As Oberman explains:

A genuine love of God, above everything else, is within the reach of man, not only in paradise, but also after the fall. Indeed, the material aftermath of original sin, concupiscence, has made for serious difficulties, but the psychological counterforces of the past mercy and future justice of God are extremely powerful. Under these circumstances, it is doubtless possible for the sinner to come to a genuine act of contrition. Once this genuine love for God's sake is reached, the last obstacle is removed and the road to acceptance is paved by the eternal decrees of God.²³

Prevenient grace, if granted at all, is "thoroughly naturalized and barely distinguishable from man's natural endowments."²⁴ It is at most "a divine intervention in the natural order which points to the freedom of God to relieve man in particular cases from the *arduous but possible* task of preparing himself."²⁵ Grace is really then the result, not the cause, of good works: "When natural man has reached a certain level of perfection, grace will be infused. Though this infusion may stabilize and perfect the will, it does not change anything in the requirement that man should do his very best."²⁶ Before the infusion of grace, human best efforts earn the "merit of congruity," after grace they earn the "merit of condignity," but in either case it is truly human merit that earns grace and salvation.

Oberman summarizes and passes the same judgment as Luther:

Biel has a remarkable doctrine of justification: seen from different vantage points, justification is at once *sola gratia* and *solis operibus*! *By grace alone*—because if God had not decided to adorn man’s good works with created and uncreated grace, man would never be saved. *By works alone*—because not only does man have to produce the framework or substance for this adornment, but God by the two laws of grace is committed, even obliged to add to this framework infused grace and final acceptance. Once man has done his very best, the other parts follow automatically. It is clear that emphasis falls on “justification by works alone”; the concept of “justification by grace alone” is a rational outer structure dependent on the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*... *It is therefore evident that Biel’s doctrine of justification is essentially Pelagian.*²⁷

In short, Biel taught justification by divine acceptance—namely, justification by those naturally possible good works that God has graciously promised to accept—rather than justification by grace or faith.²⁸ Of course, this justification depends on successfully having done one’s very best with one’s natural powers, and who can be sure of that? As Luther experienced in his own person, this approach necessarily increases “scrupulousness and despair.”²⁹ Biel won’t even accept “the light of truth, the joy in doing good works, and peace of conscience” as signs of having succeeded, since those feelings might be a trick of the devil.³⁰ A Christian can be certain that God wills to save, but not necessarily that God wills to save oneself.³¹

Luther’s objections to Biel are obvious. The reformer especially takes Biel to task in the 1517 Disputation against Scholastic Theology, condemning “Gabriel” by name thirteen times (in Theses 6, 10, 13, 20, 23, 54, 55, 57, 61, 90, 91, 92, and 93). He rejects Biel’s confidence in natural human powers after the fall—for Luther, this would call the whole purpose of Christ’s incarnation and death into question—arguing instead that grace is needed before the human being can do or offer anything: “On the part of man, however, nothing precedes grace except indisposition and even rebellion against grace.”³² It was certainly no error on Luther’s part to charge Biel with Pelagianism redux. Notably, Biel’s predecessor and inspiration William of Ockham had been charged by Luther’s fellow Augustinian Hermit Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358) with Pelagianism, and perhaps not incidentally he was one of the few late medieval scholastics to win Luther’s approbation.³³

So where did the mistake lie that contemporary ecumenism can identify and address? It was twofold: first, that Luther identified Thomas Aquinas as one of the offending scholastic theologians, portraying all of scholasticism as a single heretical whole; and second, that the Roman party failed to recognize and condemn Biel’s Pelagianism, and so also failed to recognize that the condemned Luther was far more in line with the authoritative Angelic Doctor than with the uncondemned Gabriel Biel.³⁴

Even here, it is tricky to untangle the web. In the first place, it’s not surprising that Luther placed Thomas and Biel in the same camp, since Biel appealed to Thomas

for support. Indeed, the early Thomas in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* said more or less the same thing as Biel regarding natural human powers preparing the way for grace.³⁵ It was only due to the internal arguments of fifteenth-century Thomists, especially Johannes Capreolus, that Thomas's later writings—in particular the *Summa Theologica*—were recognized as authoritative, especially when they differed from Thomas's earlier writings.³⁶ Luther wasn't familiar firsthand either with Thomas or with these reflections of his followers.

But Thomas's differences from Biel, and his alignment with the Augustine that Luther so warmly approved, become clear with even a cursory examination of the *Summa*. For instance, Thomas poses the question, "Whether by his own natural powers and without grace man can love God above all things?" The ensuing arguments at first seem to suggest sympathy with Biel: Thomas answers yes, natural powers are sufficient, despite all arguments to the contrary. But then comes the vital distinction that Biel was later to erase: between humans before and after the fall. Thomas explains that "in the state of perfect nature man did not need the gift of grace added to his natural endowments, in order to love God above all things naturally, although he needed God's help to move him to it; but in the state of corrupt nature man needs, even for this, the help of grace to heal his nature."³⁷ The next several questions bear out Thomas's insistence on the priority of grace in all matters of human salvation. Can humans merit eternal life without grace? Thomas answers no; such is quite beyond natural human powers, even uncorrupted ones. While it is true that "[m]an, by his will, does works meritorious of everlasting life... for this it is necessary that the will of man should be prepared with grace by God."³⁸ More to the point in Luther's dispute with Biel, Thomas asks "[w]hether a man, by himself and without the external aid of grace, can prepare himself for grace." He answers no. Thomas explains: "[W]e must presuppose a gratuitous gift of God, Who moves the soul inwardly or inspires the good wish... [T]hat [human wills] are 'turned' to God can only spring from God's having 'turned' to them. Now to prepare oneself for grace is, as it were, to be turned to God... Man's turning to God is by free-will; and thus man is bidden to turn himself to God. But free-will can only be turned to God, when God turns it."³⁹ The apparently active work of "turning to God" turns out to be really the passive fact of "being turned" by God; Thomas redefines the whole sense of the phrase.

Thomas did not end up being just another scholastic theologian. In 1323 he was canonized a saint by Pope John XXII. His *Summa* was laid upon the altar along with the Scriptures and papal decrees during the Council of Trent, and in 1567 Pope Pius V declared Thomas a doctor of the church. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) waxes lyrical about him and exhorts the leaders of the church "in all earnestness to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas, and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and for the advantage of all the sciences."⁴⁰ If there is a difference of opinion between Biel and Thomas, there should be no doubt on the Roman Catholic side that the latter overrules the former.

The significance for ecumenism should be clear by now. There was not a single medieval Western teaching on justification, but at least two major, opposing, and *competing internal traditions* (with of course many varieties on either side). Luther opposed Biel's

take as Pelagian, and due to his own limited knowledge extended this criticism to all other scholastic theologians, including Thomas. But Thomas was as opposed to Biel's position as was Luther. This often unrecognized inner contradiction within Roman Catholicism has continued down to the present and is a long and complicated story.

But given this history, the Catholic assent to the following statement in the Joint Declaration is of tremendous significance: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" (§3.15). In other words, justification does not come by our natural powers but by "grace alone," not by our good works but "in faith in Christ's saving work," and all this is "not because of any merit on our part." In its assent to the Joint Declaration, the Catholic Church has committed itself afresh to Thomas's interpretation of justification and has rejected Biel's. There is plenty of room and reason to ask whether the Thomistic take on justification actually wins the day in parish-level Catholic preaching and pastoral practice (just as Catholics may legitimately ask how well Lutheran clergy succeed in conveying the gospel faithfully, even according to Lutheran standards). But there is an officially sanctioned benchmark now for ongoing ecumenical engagement.

3. Self-Correction

Religious and theological movements are never clean and tidy with neatly demarcated edges. Especially in their first growth, they are explosive, creative, and exploratory. Much of enduring value is produced in this initial phase, but not everything is of equal worth. It is the work of succeeding generations to sort out, sift, and discern. This is clear enough in the origins of Christianity itself. Not all literature about Christ was judged to be equally true and valuable. The four canonical gospels finally won a permanent place in Christian teaching; the gnostic gospels were discarded as distortions of Jesus's life and teaching.

So it is for subsequent theological developments in the church's history. Not every proposal, every idea, every line of canon law, every theology is of equal worth. Some are carried along past their usefulness or despite their inadequacy simply because of their association with a famous name or movement. That makes shaking them off difficult business, but it can be done. A core Reformation principle is that the church always needs to reassess and prune away things of inferior value. Theologies always stand in need of correction.

An example of this corrective work can be found in the Leuenberg Agreement (LA) of 1973.⁴¹ The statement was drafted by representatives of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe to sort out longstanding differences between them and establish a basis for church fellowship in the form of altar and pulpit fellowship. The LA did not remove all differences or deny them; but it did assert that there was sufficient common ground to remove the "church-dividing character" of these differences. The LA was to be only the beginning of ever-growing fellowship and ongoing theological discussion. Accordingly, the document is very brief: it sets out the basic groundwork in anticipation of extensive further exploration.

The three primary areas of historic disagreement between Lutherans and Reformed are, according to the LA, the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, Christology (in particular the personal union of the two natures in Christ), and predestination. It is the last of these that is of most interest here. Historically, the Reformed churches have followed John Calvin's teaching on so-called "double predestination." As the second-generation Reformer put it:

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.⁴²

For Calvin, predestination is an essential doctrine because it precludes salvation on the basis of human merit, which of course is a central theme in all Reformation theology. He is not terribly impressed by Luther's warnings to stay away from the doctrine of predestination as a dangerous matter for human minds to probe. But the problem from the Lutheran side, far more than the personal affliction that the doctrine is likely to cause, has been the separation of God's eternal decree from the person and work of Christ. In doctrinal shorthand, the Reformed tradition has tended to teach "limited atonement": Christ only died for those whom God had predestined to save. Lutherans by contrast have taught "universal atonement," extending the real possibility of salvation to all. The division of the saved from the reprobate takes place though the work of the Holy Spirit in calling people to faith, but God does not protologically will the damnation of anyone. As the Formula of Concord (Epitome) puts it, rejected is the error "that God does not desire that everyone should be saved, but rather that without regard to their sins—only because of God's naked decision, intention, and will—some are designated for damnation, so that there is no way that they could be saved."⁴³

This, then, is the background of the LA statement on the doctrine of predestination. The first part reads: "In the Gospel we have the promise of God's unconditional acceptance of sinful man. Whoever puts his trust in the Gospel can know that he is saved and praise God for his election. For this reason we can speak of election only with respect to the call to salvation in Christ" (III.24). In other words, the "double" part of predestination has been discarded. Atonement is universal, salvation is offered to all without distinction, none are eternally chosen to be reprobate. The LA then continues:

Faith knows by experience that the message of salvation is not accepted by all; yet it respects the mystery of God's dealings with men. It bears witness to the seriousness of human decision and at the same time to the reality of God's universal purpose of salvation. The witness of the Scriptures to Christ forbids us to suppose that God has uttered an eternal decree for the final condemnation of specific individuals or of a particular people. (III.25)

In short, Calvin's teaching on double predestination, specifically with regard to an eternal decree apart from Christ, has been rejected by the Reformed churches. A

correction to the inherited teaching was seen to be necessary and in the context of this ecumenical agreement was officially made.

It is interesting to note that this correction did not come about as a result of Lutheran pressure or even the official ecumenical conversation itself. It was a *self-correction* largely due to the influence of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth. He certainly was well familiar with both Calvin and Luther's theology, and the latter's influence is unmistakable, but Barth's work is overall more Reformed in flavor than Lutheran. Nevertheless, working from within his own tradition, Barth became persuaded of the untenability of the traditional Reformed doctrine of double predestination and set out to correct it: "[W]e have to expunge completely from our minds the thought of the foreordination of a rigid and balanced system of election and reprobation . . . the idolatrous concept of a *decretum absolutum*."⁴⁴ Barth's case has been generally accepted by the Reformed world, and the occasion of pursuing ecumenical fellowship gave Reformed church bodies the opportunity to declare their theological self-correction publicly.

4. Expansion

Pentecostalism and related charismatic movements as we know them today began at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906. While there were precedents in Wesleyan-Holiness churches in the nineteenth century, it's the Azusa Street experience that stamped the twentieth-century movement. Central to this pentecostal awakening was missionary fervor, which in no small part accounts for Pentecostalism's incredible growth. The range is from 200 million to 500 million Pentecostals alive today—and even at the smaller end, that's more than twice the number of Lutherans in the world.

This also means that the relationship, potential and actual, of Lutherans to Pentecostals is quite different from Lutheran relationships with "historic" churches, especially those with which Lutherans found themselves in conflict in the sixteenth century. While pentecostal churches did and do draw some of their constituency from disaffected Lutherans, their origins are not the fire of controversy over a doctrinal point of difference or a political upheaval. In fact, it's not terribly helpful to think about the differences between Lutherans and Pentecostals as primarily doctrinal, even though such is the preferred Lutheran mode for analyzing differences. This is especially the case since Pentecostalism so often assumes a basic Reformation Protestant outlook as the foundation for its own particular contributions.⁴⁵

The difficulty that has arisen between Pentecostals and historic churches is that Pentecostals emphasize an aspect of the life lived in Christ through faith that has been discarded, neglected, or forgotten in the historic churches (largely, though not entirely). The very suggestion that Lutherans and others have forgotten or overlooked something, even if it does not touch on the central issue of salvation, is threatening and rather insulting. It suggests that they have failed to teach the whole counsel of God, and indeed the slogan "full gospel" doesn't shy away from suggesting that other churches teach only a "partial gospel."⁴⁶ The often polemical nature of pentecostal preaching vis-à-vis other Christian churches has frequently meant that their message has been rejected out of hand or tarnished with a variety of put-downs, everything from demonic possession to psychological instability.

Assuming we can cut away all the polemical inflation on both sides and the inevitable distortions to which every church is prey (and certainly Lutherans are no exception to that rule), the pentecostal proposal is rather straightforward. It emphasizes, first of all, the life and ministry of Jesus that is mysteriously absent from the three great Creeds, with his works of healing and exorcism. Taking seriously the real presence of the living Christ even today among his people, Pentecostals assume that healing and release from evil spirits is as possible now as before the ascension. Furthermore, following the clues of the book of Acts and Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts, even with all the proper warnings and caveats in place, they see no reason to assume that such gifts of power for the sake of faith and mission are to be ruled out of court for the church today. The experience of "Spirit baptism," which generally initiates the flowering of spiritual gifts, is subsequent to (always logically, though sometimes temporally simultaneous to) the gift of salvation. Salvation is in no way contingent upon the reception of spiritual gifts. But if the Lord who bestowed salvation also sees fit to bestow spiritual gifts for the upbuilding of the church and the missionary task, why should the church refuse them? Such is pentecostal/charismatic reasoning.

In short, from a Reformation church perspective, Pentecostals propose to expand the range of possibility and expectation in the life of the baptized, saved Christian. Can such experiences be compatible with Lutheran teaching? The question is moot, because they already are. There have been charismatic movements within Lutheran churches in the U.S. (both in the Missouri Synod and in the ELCA and its predecessor bodies) as well as in Europe. European churches in fact have a long history of charismatic movements erupting within the Lutheran folk churches; Finland has been particularly rich in lay charismatic movements.

More dramatically, in many places in Africa, there is no meaningful distinction between Lutheranism and charismatic revival. It's a good question whether Lutheranism would have survived in Africa at all without the integration of charismatic elements, since this form of Christianity has spoken most potently to Africans. The Evangelical (i.e., Lutheran) Church Mekane Yesus (ECMY) in Ethiopia is a premiere example of this reality. It is among the largest and fastest growing Lutheran churches on the planet (rivaled perhaps only by the also charismatically-influenced church in Tanzania). Already in the 1970s the ECMY had to address collectively what pentecostal influences and elements would mean to its life as a Lutheran church. The 1976 document "The Work of the Holy Spirit" is the most balanced and mature statement on the place of charismatic renewal within the global Lutheran church.⁴⁷

Charismatic renewal began in Ethiopia in the city centers in 1965, introduced largely by classical pentecostal missionaries. Over the next ten years a great deal of conflict erupted within the Lutheran church, with blame on both sides: older leaders refused to give space to younger pentecostal-influenced leaders and objected to their less formal worship practices; younger leaders responded with disobedience and sometimes by leaving the church altogether. By the mid-1970s, it became clear that a church-wide resolution of conflict was necessary. A consultation of forty persons issued a statement to serve as official guidelines for dealing with the situation, and the guidelines proved to be

remarkably effective. For some years the Lutheran church in Ethiopia had been “praying for a revival among our church members aimed at strengthening them in their faith and especially to help them reach out to their non-Christian brothers with the Gospel”⁴⁸ (note the missionary emphasis, as in Pentecostalism’s origins); and the charismatic revival was taken to be exactly that longed-for and God-given renewal. It simply required thoughtful, biblically-guided leadership to settle the conflicts that erupted.

After reviewing the biblical portrait of the Holy Spirit (always clearly seen to be the Spirit of the Father and of Christ), and excerpting the responses of various other Christian bodies to charismatic renewal, the final section of the document recommends that the Lutheran church “be open to it, see it as a blessing and guide it according to the Word of God.”⁴⁹ Following this statement are “Practical Solutions for the Difficulties Within the ECMY.” The charismatic focus on speaking in tongues, healing, exorcisms, and informal worship are recognized as different from conventional practice.

But it is said that there is a difference between “necessary conflicts”—namely the conflicts between God and Satan when the latter wants to destroy a reawakening of faith—and “unnecessary conflicts,” such as those over authority, doctrine, and styles of worship, all of which can be resolved through scriptural guidance and righteous conduct.⁵⁰ To combat these unnecessary conflicts, church members of all ages are enjoined to engage in Bible study together, to show each other respect, to recognize everyone’s importance as equal members of the body of Christ, and to put renewed emphasis on teaching the word of God. The leaders of the charismatic renewal within the ECMY had declared their intention to abide by the ECMY constitution and the Lutheran Confessions, which the guidelines gratefully acknowledge, while reasserting that the word of God, not personal experience, is the basis of doctrine, as apparently certain charismatic elements tended to believe.

It is further acknowledged that “[e]very new revival will bring with it new demands for change of worship. And a living church shall be willing to listen to these demands. . . . Ways of worship cannot be considered as doctrine.”⁵¹ Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is cited as evidence for this, with the suggestion that worship should evolve to offer “more freedom and openness for the manifestation of the different gifts of the Holy Spirit,” while at the same time “young people [should be] taught the meaning of the traditional worship service.” Overall a desire is expressed to “develop one common liturgy for the whole Church, a liturgy with a form that fits better our Ethiopian context.”⁵²

As to more specific charismatic practices, “[w]e will encourage the biblical practice of prayer for the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the healing of the sick” and “[w]e recommend that speaking in tongues be restricted from meetings when there is no interpretation, but that the congregations must welcome and encourage it whenever interpretation is given.”⁵³ At the end, the conclusion is drawn that the conflict is the result of inadequate teaching of the word of God: the concerns of both sides can be addressed when both know better the content of the Scripture. The document closes with the exhortation: “Let us therefore, young and old together, bow down in humbleness in front of our Lord to repent our sins, to repent of the divisions in our midst and pray that God will create this fruit [of the Spirit] in us.”⁵⁴

What we have in the case of ECMY, then, is the *expansion* of one church's tradition and theological scope through its encounter with another. The result was not the compromise of the Lutheran church or the abandonment of its core values. In fact, the encounter with pentecostal movements recalled this Lutheran church to its own central value of teaching and understanding the Scriptures, while empowering it to do better at its missionary calling.⁵⁵

5. Reminder

A reader of the Lutheran Confessions cannot but be struck by the numerous references to the church fathers. While Scripture is invoked as the only final authority, the patristic witness is always the second line of defense. Ancient heresies are rejected (such as those of the Manicheans, Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, and Samosatzenians mentioned in Article I of the Augsburg Confession, the Donatists in Article VIII, and the Novatians in Article XII), while the language of the church councils (for example, "two natures, the divine and the human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ" following the Council of Chalcedon in Article III of the Augsburg Confession, and the discussion of the Person of Christ in Epitome/Solid Declaration VIII of the Formula of Concord) is sounded as evidence of the orthodoxy of the Lutheran movement. By name, the Augsburg Confession refers to Ambrose, Augustine, Cyprian, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Irenaeus; these church fathers appear elsewhere in the confessional writings as well. A frequent and prime appeal against Roman practice is its "innovation" over against the custom of the early church.

Luther and his followers quickly realized that they didn't need to appeal only to the past to make their case. They had a living example to turn to: the Eastern churches. And in the self-understanding of the Orthodox church, it is simply the early church continued into the present without disruption, dogmatically or canonically. Lutherans (and eventually other Protestants) were gratified to have an example of Christians of great antiquity not under the jurisdiction of the pope. Unsurprisingly, the sixteenth century saw several efforts to bring the new Protestant and old Orthodox churches together: Melanchthon collaborated on a translation of the Augsburg Confession with a Greek deacon from Constantinople; the first Lutheran archbishop of Sweden, Laurentius Olavi, went with a delegation to visit the patriarch of Moscow;⁵⁶ and Tübingen theologians established a long-running conversation by letter with Jeremias II, the patriarch of Constantinople, based on Melanchthon's translation of the Augsburg Confession.⁵⁷ Succeeding centuries saw various kinds of encounters ranging from hostile to friendly, political to theological in motivation, but forever after Protestants and Orthodox were on each other's radar screen.

The nineteenth century saw a renewed interest in the church fathers throughout the Western church. The entrepreneurial French priest J. P. Migne published 162 volumes of the *Patrologia Graeca* and 221 volumes of the *Patrologia Latina*. The Oxford Movement of the Anglican communion produced forty-five volumes in translation for the "Library of the Fathers," while cooperation between Presbyterians and Episcopalians in both Britain and the U.S. produced the ante-Nicene fathers and Nicene and post-

Nicene fathers series. On a scholarly level, Adolf von Harnack reignited Protestant interest in the fathers through his not entirely sympathetic assessment of how the Greek theologians “hellenized” the simple kerygma of Jesus and Paul.⁵⁸ The early and eager entry of the Orthodox churches into the ecumenical movement, starting around 1920 with the encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate entitled “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere,”⁵⁹ further enhanced Western and Protestant interest in the fathers.

The movement went in both directions: interest in the church fathers created interest in the Orthodox churches, and fresh acquaintance with the Orthodox churches increased interest in the church fathers. The intensive *ressourcement* of the patristic period by mid-twentieth century Western theologians, particularly evident in Karl Barth and in Catholic theologians like Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, had a lasting effect on Western theology. The most important of these results was the rediscovery, in effect, that the gospel is incomprehensible apart from the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity was the one classical doctrine almost entirely undisputed in the sixteenth century, but it was not used as a resource for addressing the conflicts that erupted. A common re-rooting in the ecumenical councils of the early church and the centrality of Trinitarian doctrine were crucial to the ecumenical progress of the twentieth century. This can even be seen in the World Council of Churches’ revision of its statement of faith. The founding constitution of 1948 was decisive but minimalistic: “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.” While this is a good start, it says nothing of the Lord Jesus Christ’s Father or their Holy Spirit, nor anything about the scriptural basis for this confession. In 1961, the constitution was revised to state that the WCC is a “fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

In this East-West encounter, ecumenical engagement has given the churches the chance to remember things that they’ve forgotten. Whether Lutherans realize it consciously or not, Reformation theology doesn’t work apart from its basis in the Trinitarian and christological formulations of the first few Christian centuries. Luther’s sacramental theology, for one example among many, is an instance of “remembering” Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology. Though Luther had no access to Cyril’s own writings, by following the same logic as the patristic deposit of faith he reached the same basic conclusions as the champion of Ephesus.⁶⁰ In meeting with churches that claim unchanging continuity with the early church, Lutherans and other Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics, have recognized explicitly that a Christian theology worth its salt cannot be ignorant or indifferent to the foundation laid by the church fathers. It has been a salutary reminder to Westerners often obsessed with the upheavals of the past five hundred years.

Another case of ecumenically-driven reminder can be seen in the renewed Protestant interest in hagiography. The process began in Scandinavia, especially Sweden, where attachment to the old saint days was the strongest. Efforts have been made to re-establish a calendar for veneration.⁶¹ Germans have made moves in this direction as well, inspired by the martyrdom of those who resisted the Nazi regime, such as the uni-

versally revered Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁶² The saints who resisted the Communist oppression of Christianity are coming to be recognized as well.⁶³ Inevitably, reconsideration of hagiography takes Protestants into the company of Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox, as well as to the rediscovery of pre-schism saints. Yet this movement is not simply a wholesale resumption of pre-Reformation practice. One looks in vain for recommendations among Protestants to *invoke* the saints in prayer. But it is a fitting opportunity to rediscover the guidelines offered by the Lutheran Confessions for proper, non-idolatrous *veneration* of the saints. Especially worthy of notice in this regard is Article XXI in both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology.

These texts caught my own attention several years ago, in no small part because of encounters with Orthodox Christians, particularly the work of the French theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. A pioneer of the “new hagiography” among the Orthodox, she approached the saints unafraid of their human and even flawed aspects, seeing in their failures the greater glory of God in using earthen vessels. This new Orthodox approach to hagiography, the Confessional guidelines, reverence for Bonhoeffer, and curiosity about other unknown lights in Lutheran history led me to establish a hagiography department in *Lutheran Forum*, presenting biographical sketches of exceptional witnesses to Christ within the Lutheran family.⁶⁴ Readers are not exhorted to invoke them in prayer but “to give thanks to God... because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are the greatest gifts, they ought to be extolled very highly, and we ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts just as Christ praises faithful managers,” as Melancthon so beautifully put it.⁶⁵ In short, through the ecumenical encounter with the Orthodox, I was reminded of something of authentic Lutheran vintage; and in developing it, I hope the ecumenical connections can further be strengthened.

6. Repentance and Forgiveness

Last but certainly not least, ecumenism suggests the possibility of downright sin in a church’s past. The division of the one body of Christ is never a circumstantial or accidental matter: there is always sin involved when Christ’s final prayer for the unity of his disciples is violated. No amount of doctrinal dialogue can repair the damage of division without the fundamental work of confession and repentance undergirding it.

This remains, however, a largely unexplored area. Ecumenism’s first hundred years has had to proceed with a kind of delicate diplomacy, politely granting to each church the right to consider itself a church and believe its own teaching, gently exploring areas of commonality without recourse to old and tired recriminations against one another. The fact that not every church really acknowledges every other church *as* church has made this precarious business; defensiveness lurks behind every ecclesiology. It is good that churches have to a large measure ceased and desisted in accusing one another, but at some point this silence of etiquette needs to be replaced with self-accusation. Accountability for our own sins is our duty to God even before it is our duty to each other.

A critical movement in this direction grew out of the international Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue, which itself got started because of an awkward public celebration.

In 1980 Lutheran churches worldwide marked the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, inviting other Christians to join them. Mennonites were included. The Mennonites, however, couldn't help but notice that the Augsburg Confession includes clauses stating that Lutherans condemn five errors explicitly attributed to Anabaptists. What Lutherans by and large didn't realize is that the Mennonites consider themselves to be the direct heirs of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Their present name comes from the early Anabaptist leader Menno Simons. In effect, the Lutherans had invited the Mennonites to celebrate their own condemnation! As a result of this faux-pas, three national dialogues took place thereafter: in France (1981–1984), Germany (1989–1992), and the United States (2001–2004). These did much to improve ecumenical relations on the national level, but it was clear that a dialogue at the level of the world communions was needed to consider the present-day relation between the historically estranged churches.

Once the international dialogue convened, with delegates from the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference, a new set of difficulties arose. From the Lutheran point of view, it seemed strange that the Mennonites wanted to maintain the name “Anabaptist,” especially since, in the Mennonite view, they do not “re-baptize” but actually baptize in the first place. But Mennonites are very proud of their Anabaptist heritage and have no wish to distance themselves from it. This is itself something of a recent development. Up until the mid-twentieth century, scholars tended to regard the sixteenth-century Anabaptists as wild anarchists. It was not until the Anabaptists and related groups were renamed the “Radical Reformation” that attitudes shifted and scholarly interest grew. Mennonites on their part started studying Anabaptist texts with fresh eyes, found them inspirational, and reclaimed the Anabaptists as their spiritual ancestors. So maintaining the connection is essential to Mennonite self-understanding today.

Despite this, the dialogue revealed that present-day Mennonites *also* reject some of the opinions attributed to Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession, such as thinking “that the Holy Spirit comes to human beings without the external Word through their own preparations and works” (Article V).⁶⁶ In several cases, what's condemned in the Augsburg Confession was the minority opinion of a fringe group that has never been central in Mennonite theology, so those condemnations could be dismissed as not applying to the present-day partner. Two of them, however, could not be erased so easily. Article IX condemns “the Anabaptists who disapprove of the baptism of children and assert that children are saved without baptism”;⁶⁷ Mennonites still reserve baptism to adult believers. Article XVI condemns “the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities” as “to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers... to take an oath when required by magistrates,”⁶⁸ to name the ones that remain problematic for Mennonites today.

The Lutherans were ready to tackle those two issues, but as the discussion proceeded, it became clear that the past was intruding on the present, and not in a good way. The Mennonites remembered something that most Lutherans had forgotten: namely, that some sixteenth-century Lutheran theologians had condoned the use of violence, even capital punishment, against the Anabaptists, and some Lutheran princes took them

at their word. It appears that Lutherans were directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of at least one hundred Anabaptists. (Although figures are hard to establish with absolute certainty, it seems that around 2,500 Anabaptists altogether were executed for religious “crimes.”) And this injustice was preserved in Mennonite memory—particularly in a big book called *Martyrs Mirror*,⁶⁹ which details the stories of Anabaptists who suffered and died for their faith, though it rarely specifies whether the persecutor was Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, or something else—while most Lutherans forgot all about it.

As a result, the dialogue team realized that it was time to change tactics. Instead of negotiating theological differences directly, Lutherans and Mennonites first needed to retell the history of their churches, together, for the first time.⁷⁰ They had to be completely honest and accountable to each other if they were going to heal the bad memories. They had to recognize that both sets of their theological ancestors were part of the broad movement of Reformation; neither of them had an exclusive claim on it.

A number of interesting facts turned up in the writing of this history. First, although today and for a long time Mennonites have been committed to nonviolence, their origins were sometimes violent. Early Anabaptist history is tied up with the Peasants’ War that broke out in the 1520s. It was actually this terrible disaster that made many of them realize the wickedness of violent strategies and commit the rest of their lives to peace. However, Lutherans at the time didn’t know that. They thought Anabaptists were dangerous and violent anarchists. Yet already in the 1520s and 1530s, Anabaptists like the Swiss Brethren, Hans Hut, and Menno Simons were openly promoting nonviolent engagement as the proper way to obey Christ’s teachings.

In fact, what the Lutherans actually knew about Anabaptists, when the Augsburg Confession was written in 1530, was extremely little. The movement had not yet unified. There were a number of marginal or extremist figures whose ideas did not end up influencing the Anabaptist movement afterward. The chief thing Lutherans knew about Anabaptists was their habit of “re-baptism,” which not only did the Lutherans find theologically offensive but which had been, for nearly a thousand years, a crime punishable by death in European lands.

Finally, the Anabaptist refusal to take oaths of loyalty or participate in war appeared to many as if they were simply taking advantage of the potentially costly actions of everyone else. Their religious principles suggested political treachery. The experiences of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism that are so normal in many contemporary societies were simply unheard-of then. No one seriously thought a political entity could include more than one religion (the eternally uneasy position of the Jews is a case in point). In this situation, Lutherans were threatened by any possible alignment of their own movement with that of the Anabaptists: it could get them judged as traitors. The Augsburg Confession was a plea for tolerance of Luther’s followers as much as it was a theological statement, and part of their case was to prove that they were nothing like the universally despised Anabaptists, who had been condemned politically a year earlier in the 1529 Diet of Speyer for their re-baptisms.

Altogether, the result was that Luther and Melancthon both thought it was permissible to punish Anabaptists by secular power for their religious offenses. In

some cases these two Reformers positively encouraged it; in other cases they didn't object to the princes showing leniency to the Anabaptists. On the other hand, the Swabian reformer Johannes Brenz argued very strongly against any secular punishment of Anabaptists. He realized that punishing *any* particular religious group could ultimately lead to punishing *every* religious group. The "orthodox" would end up being no safer than the "heretics." The Scriptures alone were to be the treatment for spiritual "crimes," otherwise, as Brenz so vividly put it, "[W]hat point would there be in studying Scripture, for the hangman would be the most learned doctor?"⁷¹

In the process of retelling this history together with Mennonites, it became clear to the Lutherans that, if they and the Mennonites were to have a future together, the Lutherans would have to admit publicly the error of their church in the past, apologize, and ask for forgiveness. The Mennonites did not ask for an apology; it was a free decision on the part of the Lutherans to offer one. The curiosity of apologizing for the dead, to the living descendants of the victims, has prompted reflection on the meaning of the communion of saints and the interconnectedness of Christians over time as well as space, and what this could mean for an ecumenical future.⁷²

The first step toward this apology was taken through a vote of the Council of the LWF in 2008, when representatives of the member churches agreed to explore this course of action. They were especially concerned not only to take responsibility for the failures of the Lutheran tradition in the past but also to articulate connections between the sins of the sixteenth century and the lives of Lutheran churches now. Then a handful of Lutheran representatives attended the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Paraguay in July 2009 to announce the intention to seek forgiveness. The response was overwhelming—tears of joy, relief, and gratitude on the part of the Mennonites.

The final step occurred at the 2010 LWF assembly in Stuttgart (notably Brenz's home city), when after a unanimous vote the Lutherans publicly stated: "Trusting in God who in Jesus Christ was reconciling the world to himself, we ask for forgiveness—from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers—for the harm that our forebears in the sixteenth century committed to Anabaptists, for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and scholarly forms, to the present day." Remarkably and unexpectedly, a Mennonite delegation at the assembly arrived prepared with a statement of full pardon and joy in the reconciliation at long last. They were also able to acknowledge their own sins in the course of the estrangement, such as a pernicious victim mentality and pride at their separateness.⁷³

Note that the Lutherans' repentance and the Mennonites' forgiveness does not pretend to resolve all theological disagreements between them. It is not an exercise in dishonesty or mere diplomacy. Rather, Christians are commanded to confess and repent of their sins, and the ecumenical encounter reminded Lutherans of an unrepented-of sin, giving them the chance finally to confess it. It has opened up the possibility for conversation and cooperation with Mennonites, which was cut off by sins half a millennium old. And it has led to another ecumenical "first": an international dialogue between Lutherans, Mennonites, and Roman Catholics on the subject of baptism.

A frank appraisal of Christian history, especially in the turmoil of the sixteenth century and beyond, shows staggering cruelties committed by the body of Christ against itself, in the name of righteousness but far more often for political expediency and self-justification. We have no reason to expect a renewed and unified community of love in truth without serious reckoning of our crimes. Doctrinal discussions remain at some level artificial without admitting how much the violence and politics of the past influenced the course of events.⁷⁴ As we approach the anniversary year of 2017, it behooves us all to consider well what this celebration might look like. Imagine a 2017 characterized by mutual repentance and forgiveness rather than triumphalism on one side and stony silence on the other. That would do more honor to the gospel proclaimed by Luther than any number of self-administered pats on the back.

Conclusion

The ecumenism described here, in these six varieties of ecumenical progress, operates on two assumptions. The first is an unswerving obedience to the eighth commandment. Falsely declaring unity violates the eighth commandment, but falsely declaring impediments to unity violates it as well. Standing by past judgments that are demonstrably the result of misunderstanding, political expediency, coercion, lack of logical coherence, or plain old sin serve no one, least of all the God of truth. If we say that we have no sin, and that we have had no sin in our respective church histories, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Ecumenism requires us to love the truth more than our own tribal boundaries.

The second assumption is that churches are not locked boxes. If they are living communities of the living God, then they are in constant contact with the wider world, both the great mass of the unevangelized as well as others who profess faith in Jesus Christ. No church is immune to the effects of this interchange, and it is faithless to suppose that in every case the result is tainting, compromise, or loss. Churches over time learn and improve; they also forget and fail. Sometimes the impetus is external and sometimes it is internal; it can be the result of social change, spiritual awakening, or intellectual exploration. It is with good reason that ecumenical statements distinguish between the “present-day dialogue partner” and that partner’s past. Ecumenism asks churches to discern within their own bodies what kinds of developments are faithful extensions or revisions of their own best and wisest insights, and which are misguided, subpar, or destructive.

Ecumenism of this stripe cannot be about doctrinal trade-off, then: it’s not a matter of me sacrificing this if you’ll sacrifice that. It certainly can’t be solved by political solutions, even if these are less violent than in the past. It can only be the outcome of both mutual and internal discernment in the churches. It will take time, it will involve missteps, and it will require humility. Above all it will be the work of the Holy Spirit, who, as Jesus promised us, will lead us into all truth (Jn 16:13).

Endnotes

- ¹ See my discussion of Lutheran and Roman Catholic acknowledgements of how the two churches formed in reaction to one another in “What Has Erfurt to Do with Rome?” *Lutheran Forum* 45/1 (Spring 2011): 2–7.
- ² Martin Luther, “Proceedings at Augsburg,” in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress, 1955ff.), 31:275 [hereafter cited as LW]. Maybe Cajetan was stung by this criticism; he spent the rest of his career till his death in 1534 writing biblical commentaries.
- ³ Ch. Morerod O.P., *Cajetan et Luther en 1518: Edition, traduction et commentaire des opuscules d’Augsbourg de Cajetan* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 1994), I:319. All quotations from this book are my translations from the French.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 319–323, X.1–7.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 323, X.8.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327, X.10.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 329, X.11.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 329, X.13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 337, X.21.
- ¹⁰ LW 31:270.
- ¹¹ LW 31:270–1.
- ¹² LW 31:271.
- ¹³ LW 31:271.
- ¹⁴ LW 31:271.
- ¹⁵ “Decree on Justification,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner S.J. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 679–80.
- ¹⁶ *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* eds. Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 53.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54–55.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹⁹ I would like to express here my gratitude to Theodor Dieter for first drawing my attention to this matter.
- ²⁰ Since very little of Biel is in English, the best resource for understanding his theology is Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1963).
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 181.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 133. Oberman’s italics here and in all the following quotations.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 176–7.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 227.
- ³² LW 31:11.
- ³³ Otto Hermann Pesch and Albrecht Peters, *Einführung in die Lehre von Gnade und Rechtfertigung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 117.
- ³⁴ *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era* notes the specific objections of Luther and his fellow reformers to Biel; see pp. 43 and 55.
- ³⁵ Oberman, 142.
- ³⁶ Oberman, 143, 145.
- ³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* [hereafter cited as STh] I–II, 109, 3. All citations of Thomas come from www.newadvent.org/summa/ (accessed March 15, 2013), which makes available *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second revised edition of 1920.
- ³⁸ STh I–II, 109, 5.
- ³⁹ STh I–II, 109, 6.
- ⁴⁰ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, §31, available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris_en.html (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁴¹ The text can be found online at www.leuenberg.net/node/642 (accessed March 15, 2013).

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 926.

⁴³ “The Formula of Concord,” Epitome XI.3, in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 519.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 143.

⁴⁵ Some clarification is needed at this point as to which Pentecostals we have in mind. The most dramatic internal Pentecostal schism was between the Trinitarians and the Oneness or Jesus’ Name Pentecostals. The former share the same dogmatic beliefs as the rest of the historic churches, especially regarding the doctrine of the Trinity and the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for salvation to which good works add nothing essential. The latter rejected baptism in the Trinitarian name in preference to the name of Jesus only, adopted a more modalistic view of the Trinity, and generally assumed the bestowal of Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts to be necessary for salvation. Oneness Pentecostals have been as thoroughly rejected by Trinitarian Pentecostals as by historic churches. While the doctrinal reasons are valid, the fact that the divisions probably have more to do with poor race relations than theology are tragic indeed. This article assumes Trinitarian Pentecostalism as the ecumenical partner. See the discussion in Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Introducing Pentecostalism to Lutherans,” in *Lutherans and Pentecostals in Dialogue* (Strasbourg, Pasadena, and Zürich: Institute for Ecumenical Research, David Du Plessis Center for Christian Spirituality, and European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association, 2010), 31–57.

⁴⁶ See the discussion on the “pure gospel” vs. the “full gospel” in “Insights and Analysis,” §II, in *Lutherans and Pentecostals in Dialogue*, 9–12.

⁴⁷ “The Work of the Holy Spirit,” Lutheran Church—Mekane Yesus, Ethiopia, in *Presence, Power, Praise: Documents on the Charismatic Renewal*, vol. II, ed. Kilian McDonnell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980), 150–182.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ This is reminiscent of the language of the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration): “we must steadfastly maintain the distinction between unnecessary, useless quarrels and disputes that are necessary,” BC 530.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵⁵ And it should be said that confessional Lutheranism’s constant emphasis on justification is a salutary corrective to churches whose identity lies in the renewal of the believer, even if they presume the sufficiency of Christ and faith for salvation. In reality, a healthy balance between justification and sanctification has proved very difficult for any church to maintain.

⁵⁶ George Florovsky, “The Orthodox Churches and the Ecumenical Movement Prior to 1910,” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948*, eds. Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (London: SPCK, 1967), 177.

⁵⁷ The documents are translated into English by George Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople: The Correspondence between the Tübingen Theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982).

⁵⁸ John Meyendorff, “Patristics,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC, 2002), 888.

⁵⁹ The text is available online at www.incommunion.org/2004/10/24/unto-the-churches-of-christ-everywhere/ (accessed March 15, 2013).

⁶⁰ See David Yeago, “The Bread of Life: Patristic Christology and Evangelical Soteriology in Martin Luther’s Sermons on John 6,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 39/3 (2004): 257–278, and Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther’s Works, 1523–1546* (Darmstadt: Philipp von Zabern, 1999).

⁶¹ See Yngvill Martola, “On the Question of a Lutheran Sanctoral,” *Studia Liturgica* 34/1 (2004): 92–108.

⁶² Two such hagiographical collections are *Heilige(s) für Protestanten: Zugänge zu einem “anstößigen” Begriff* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Evangelischer Presseverband für Baden, 1993) and *Ihr Ende schaut an...: Evangelische Märtyrer des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Andreas Kurschat and Harald Schulze (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008). Another book, jointly sponsored by the German (Roman Catholic) bishops’ conference and the Evangelical Church in Germany, honors Protestant and Catholic martyrs together: *Zeugen einer besseren Welt: Christliche Märtyrer des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Karl-Joseph Hummel and Christoph Strohm (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000).

⁶³ For one example, see Tibor Fabiny, *The Veil of God: The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass in Communist Hungary* (Budapest: Center for Hermeneutical Research, 2008).

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⁶⁴ See my introductory essay on the topic, “Saints for Sinners,” *Lutheran Forum* 43/1 (Spring 2009): 2–9, also available online at www.lutheranforum.org/categories/archive/spring-2009/LF2009-1_02-09_Wilson-Saints_for_Sinners.pdf/view (accessed March 15, 2013).

⁶⁵ Philip Melanchthon, “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” in BC, 238.

⁶⁶ Philip Melanchthon, “The Augsburg Confession,” in BC, 41.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁹ Thieleman Van Bragt, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom from the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660* (Waterloo: Herald, 2001).

⁷⁰ The mutual history has been published as *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission (Geneva and Strasbourg: Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference, 2010). The details of the history presented here are drawn from this report.

⁷¹ *Healing Memories*, 48.

⁷² See my discussion in “Joyful Exchanges, Part II,” *Lutheran Forum* 44/3 (2010): 4–6.

⁷³ See John D. Roth, “Mennonites and Lutherans Re-Remembering the Past,” *Lutheran Forum* 44/1 (2010): 38–42.

⁷⁴ A good beginning—though only a beginning—on the Catholic side is the statement, “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” available online at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html (accessed March 15, 2013). See also the potent studies by Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).